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THE TEACHING OF SPELLING

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Said one little lad in my fifth grade, "I used to hate to come into the room for spelling, but now I can hardly keep from rushing in! Since I made the first 100, spelling has seemed just like a game." Another said, "In the school I came from, we used to think it wonderful if four or five pupils made perfect grades. Here, we are surprised if that many do not make 100." These are but two of the many voluntary testimonies regarding the success of the method used in my spelling classes during the semester just ended.

When I was assigned the teaching of fourth- and fifth-grade spelling in a departmental program last fall, I resolved to teach that very necessary subject as I had never before taught it. Before the term began, I read carefully Suzzallo's *The Teaching of Spelling* and an article on this subject by Professor Ernest Horn, in the *Eighteenth Year Book of the National Society for the Study of Education*. These articles, with a few ideas of my own as to their practical application, produced results which seem worthy of mention to others who may be interested in securing better results in their spelling classes.

Briefly, the main points of my method are these:

1. Definite assignments for a somewhat extended period of time.
2. Careful use of uniform notebooks.
3. Review and trial lesson of week's work on Monday.
4. More teaching and less testing.
5. Individualization of the child's problem.
6. Weekly test on Friday.
7. Posting of individual and class records to remain permanently in view.
8. Encouragement for each to surpass his own record.
9. The general plan for the week's work varied enough to keep interest and enthusiasm at the highest point.

The following records refer to the work of four grades of the Washington School, Wichita, Kansas, and cover one semester which was divided into three periods of six weeks each. The 4B class contained about 42 pupils; the 4A, about 48; the 5B, 35; and the 5A, 36. The 4B and 4A classes had the same assignment, as did also the 5B and 5A classes.

When work began in the fall I posted, where they were to remain throughout the semester, the following outline for the fourth grade and a similar one for the fifth grade:

FOURTH-GRADE SPELLING ASSIGNMENT

First Semester: Pages 42 to 53—Lessons 1 to 82.

Each Period: About 27 lessons, and review. Pronounce, spell, mark, and use each word in a good sentence.

	FIRST PERIOD	SECOND PERIOD	THIRD PERIOD
	Lessons	Lessons	Lessons
First week.....	1 to 6	30 to 35	61 to 66
Second week.....	6 to 11	35 to 40	66 to 71
Third week.....	11 to 16	40 to 45	71 to 76
Fourth week.....	16 to 21	45 to 50	76 to 80
Fifth week.....	21 to 26	51 to 56	80 to 82
Sixth week.....	26 to 30	56 to 60
	Review	Review	Review

This was a great convenience to all, especially to the teacher, to new pupils, and to pupils who were absent occasionally. Such a careful assignment is based upon my theory that a teacher should explain exactly what is expected of the pupil and then require his utmost effort in fulfilling the demands made upon him.

The plan of procedure was made so attractive that the children were delighted to bring five cents each to pay for the notebooks which had already been purchased. For the sake of neatness and uniformity, these books were plainly labeled by the teacher; and it was made clear that no attempt at adornment (?) was to be made by the pupil throughout the term!

Remembering that color delights the child's heart, I promised to check with a colored pencil, sometimes red, sometimes blue; and to write "Good" or "Excellent" or "O.K." when merited. The pupils were urged to beware of "C," which stood for "Careless"; and they were asked to obey promptly the summons,

"Come to me," which was an offer of special help. In short, each book was to be a "thing of beauty and a joy forever"—a gift for mother and father at the end of the semester; and a memento of which the author could be proud when old age should overtake him.

It was an eventful morning when the first pages were headed: "First Trial Lesson—September 13, 1919." Preparatory to writing more on this page, each eager child sat with spelling book open at page 42, lessons 1 to 6. While *looking* at the correct *form* of the words, the children *heard* the correct *pronunciation* as a few good sentences were given by teacher and pupils. Any peculiarities in spelling were briefly noted, and the words were discussed in an easy, friendly manner. The ideal presentation of a spelling lesson is thus described by Suzzallo:

The spelling period in the best of the modern classrooms is no longer pre-eminently a formal and meaningless translation of sight symbols into sound symbols, and vice versa; but a natural and interesting exercise in which plays, dramatizations, objects, pictures, and conversations are characteristic instruments in approaching the spelling of words. The teacher has simply made his teaching natural to life in spite of the fact that he is confronted with an artificial situation.

We attempted this in our classroom; then spellers were closed, the words were pronounced by the teacher, and written in the notebooks. During the day, or Monday evening, the *teacher* carefully checked all errors, including a missing dot for "i" or cross for "t." The check mark was used after misspelled words; the decorative "Good," "Excellent," and "O.K." were written in, and also such admonitions as the various cases required; but no per cent grades were given in these books. When the books were returned to the pupils on Tuesday, each proceeded to write in a *correct* list of *all words he had missed*, and to begin the mastery of *his own* problem. Those who had made but few mistakes proceeded at once to the use of the dictionary, the marking of words, and the building of sentences. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday were spent in individual teaching. There was no *testing* and no *grading* during this period. Questions were answered and help was given in varied and interesting ways. The teacher of spelling should keep in mind Suzzallo's statement: "A word is

never well taught unless the teacher makes certain that the pupil has (1) its meaning, (2) its pronunciation, and (3) its spelling. And these three factors must, of course, be known in full and appropriate association." To this end I used every device which I could discover or originate to interest and instruct.

The children found that most of their sentences were statements and made an effort to give exclamatory, imperative, and interrogative sentences also. Enough oral spelling was required to insure a knowledge of syllabication, and the children were led to see the value of this. In the teaching of diacritical markings, constant use was made of our "sound table"—A: *āle āt ārm āll ask was āir*; E: *mē ēgg thēre hēr they*; I: *īce īt machine gīrl*; with similar illustrations for the other vowels and diphthongs. Each child had a typewritten copy of this table pasted in his speller and there was also a table on the board for ready reference. When the children realized that they need not *guess* at the sounds but could be as *sure* of such work as of their results in arithmetic, they began to enjoy it, and to plead for "sound contests," which were often granted.

By Friday the children were on the tiptoe of expectancy for the weekly test. In this test, everyone sought a *perfect* grade—not merely a *good* grade; and the following records are on *spelling* alone. For the teacher's convenience in grading, just twenty words were given in each test. A test paper held four tests, and at the end of four weeks it was sent home to receive the signature of one or both parents, after which it was to be returned to the school. In some cases this secured the much desired co-operation of the parents; and often they added statements which gave the teacher an insight into home conditions.

Early Monday morning the individual record of every child was posted on the board, the names of the boys and girls of each grade being arranged separately and alphabetically. For example, the grades for the weekly tests for a few 4B class pupils for one period appear in Table I.

The summary of one weekly test—the one given at the end of a stormy week succeeding the Christmas holidays—is given in Table II. Out of 149 grades, 101 were perfect, and not one was below 80.

There was always friendly strife for class championship, and records to show the number of perfect grades made by each class were posted as in Table III.

At one time the 4B's called themselves "tortoises" in a race with the 4A's, who were called "hares." For a time it seemed

TABLE I
4B SPELLING—FIRST PERIOD

	First Week	Second Week	Third Week	Fourth Week	Fifth Week	Sixth Week
Clarence.....	45	100	85	85	100	90
Ivan.....	70	65	50	80	100	80
Donald.....	70	100	80	70	100	90
Ellis.....	80	85	95	100	100	95
Velma.....	65	80	80	70	100	75
Bertha.....	45	75	95	85	95	80

TABLE II

	Number in Class	Absent	100	95	90	85	80
4B.....	42	4	28	6	3	1	0
4A.....	48	3	27	9	7	1	1
5B.....	35	1	21	8	2	3	0
5A.....	36	4	25	5	1	1	0
Total....	161	12	101	28	13	6	1

TABLE III
FIRST PERIOD—NUMBER OF 100'S MADE BY EACH CLASS

	Number in Class	First Week	Second Week	Third Week	Fourth Week	Fifth Week	Sixth Week
4B.....	42	4	11	9	8	26	4
4A.....	45	23	21	16	21	25	18
5B.....	30	12	16	19	11	11	10
5A.....	35	24	21	16	24	20	11
Total.....	152	63	69	60	64	82	43

impossible for the tortoises to win, but one morning they found themselves at the finishing stake first, the victory was sketched on the board, and there was great rejoicing.

At the end of the second period we spent one morning in "taking stock" of ourselves, in looking *backward* and *forward*. Little Ivan,

in 4B, after examining his notebook intently, volunteered the remark, "I'd be ashamed to show the first of my book to anybody, but I could show the last pages to *anybody!*" There were many similar cases.

The children then enjoyed writing in their books a little note, of which the following is an example:

During the second period the 4A's held the championship in spelling for five weeks.

We made 176 of the 546 perfect grades made by Miss Martin's four classes. The 4B's made 113 perfect grades; the 5B's made 125; and the 5A's made 132.

We think we can do still better during the third period.

At another time—just after the names of the months had been studied—the little poem entitled "The Months" was carefully written in the books. Thus from time to time various interesting features were added.

At the close of the semester, the eighty lessons studied were divided into eight reviews of ten lessons each. Each day for eight days, twenty words selected from the ten assigned lessons were given with no special drill. The results are shown in Table IV.

TABLE IV

Class	Number of Tests Given	100	95	90	85	80	75	70	Below 70
4B.....	314	103	67	51	33	21	16	6	17
4A.....	369	195	73	30	21	14	13	7	16
5B.....	277	104	74	45	27	11	3	4	9
5A.....	272	119	52	42	26	13	6	5	9
Total.....	1232	521	266	168	107	59	38	22	51

Regarding this review each child wrote a final page in his book. In quoting one of these, it is but a repetition of Table IV, but it shows how *the child* was given an opportunity to understand and enjoy everything that was done. Loren's note follows:

We have just reviewed all of the semester's work. We took ten lessons each day for eight days. We wrote twenty words for each test, and *my* grades were 80, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100, 100.

Of the 369 grades in *my* class, 195 were 100; 73 were 95; 30 were 90; 21 were 85; 14 were 80; 13 were 75; 7 were 70; 16 were below 70.

The children were given the responsibility of initiating new pupils into our plan. They watched the individual records and asked to help the pupils who occasionally fell in their grades. When "Missouri" or "Oklahoma" enrolled, and gave evidence that he was a victim of the poor-spelling habit, a friendly class spirit intimated to him that it would be wise for him to adopt the revised proverb, "When in *our* class, spell as *we* do," and the new pupils invariably began at once to raise their grades.

Whatever success has attended our work is due to the fact that the children were made acquainted with the plan and furnished with a motive for constantly improving their own records, that interest was sustained in every department of the work, that each child was constantly at work upon his own problem, that pupils and teacher were enthusiastic in attempting to *win out* in the spelling game.